REVIEW ARTICLE

ON WAR, UNCERTAINTY, AND FUTURE: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE EASTERN PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

The aim: The paper aims to examine the relationship between uncertainty and plans for the future in traumatic situations such as war, as well as the role of the Eastern philosophy and its practical implications in managing uncertainty.

Materials and methods: The authors used integrative anthropological approach, interpretive research paradigm, hermeneutical approach along with narrative approach. The data collection was carried out using PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar databases. Research papers were identified according to search terms "uncertainty", "mental health", "health", "refugee", "anxiety", "depression", "war", "future", "Eastern philosophy", "mindfulness".

Conclusions: Bearing a set of negative beliefs about uncertainty and reacting negatively to uncertain and unpredictable situations, individuals fall into a vicious cycle of uncertainty fueled by their fear of uncertainty. Uncertainty takes us to the future that seems threatening or returns us to the world of primordial chaos. In both cases, we are not in the present moment, "here and now". As far as we have no control over the past and future, we feel helpless and experience fear, anxiety, depression. Returning to the present gives us back control over the situation. By expanding the range of possible visions of the future, we stop focusing on the worst-case scenario. By accepting the situation and realizing what is subject to our control and what is not, we learn to comfort uncertainty by elaborating possible futures taking into account both our desires and the current situation. Our thoughts and actions today determine our tomorrow. We cannot overcome uncertainty since it is ontologically predetermined. But we can manage our responses to uncertainty turning to the Eastern philosophy thereby maintaining our mental and physical health and expanding the functional field of human capabilities to achieve freedom and self-realization.

KEY WORDS: mental health, war, uncertainty, refugee, future, Eastern philosophy, mindfulness

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INTRODUCTION

As Arthur Schopenhauer stated, *nine-tenths of our happiness depended* on *our health* alone. Indeed, health is one of the basic human values. According to WHO, "health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" [1]. Health is understood as a dynamic process due to the peculiarities of the interaction of an individual with the environment. Our health is located on continuum ranging from wellness to illness and eventually death [2; 3].

An integral part of overall health is mental health that is more than just the absence of mental disorders. It includes emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing [4]. Though this definition is seen as hedonistic and not always corresponding to the realities of life [5], it could be interpreted as the state of a certain internal equilibrium that leads to self-congruence.

Thus, comprehensive support for health is a matter of universal concern, as well as a national security issue for countries and nations. Health is one of the key indicators in assessing the quality of life and, accordingly, human wellbeing.

No country in the world is on track to achieve parity when it comes to mental health standards. The World Mental Health surveys show that fewer than 1 in 10 individuals worldwide with a diagnosis of anxiety disorder receive adequate treatment, and more than two-thirds of people do not receive any treatment at all [6 – 8]. The COVID-19 pandemic has only made the problem more acute: fear and anxiety, emotional distress, loss of income, loneliness due to social isolation, illness and deaths of loved ones exacerbate mental health problems globally.

Unfortunately, the dreams of bright minds about the realm of reason and peace [9; 10] have never become reality, and the war in Ukraine unleashed by Russia in 2022 added fuel to the fire bringing a lot of grief, fear, and suffering upon the citizens of Ukraine. Updated WHO

estimates for the prevalence of mental disorders in conflict-affected settings demonstrate that the prevalence of "depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia was 22·1% (95% UI 18·8-25·7) at any point in time in the conflict-affected populations assessed" [11]. A psychiatrist Steve Sugden emphasizes that the war adversely affects civilians, soldiers, and those consuming the war through social media. All these groups can develop the typical psychological profile of trauma, mistrust, suspicion, and a sense of hopelessness [12]. The combined effects of the threatening physical consequences of war, such as death, injury, disability, sexual violence, and emotional consequences, such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, can cause the destruction of the sense of identity.

Apart from that, emotional pain related to the war conflicts may occur through indirect stressors, such as death or injury of the loved ones, economic hardships, or geographic displacement [13]. Trying to escape from the devastation of the war, many Ukrainians have left their homes, have crossed the borders into neighboring countries or have been forced to move inside the country. After getting into a relatively safe environment where the main attention was given to their immediate needs (food, shelter, clothing), they were faced with "the new reality", which put forward new requirements [14; 15]. And in many cases, initial hope and optimism have turned into despair caused by a sense of loss, sometimes the loss of self, within the ocean of uncertainty.

THE AIM

The paper aims to examine the relationship between uncertainty and plans for the future in traumatic situations such as war, as well as the role of the Eastern philosophy and its practical implications in managing uncertainty.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The authors used integrative anthropological approach, interpretive research paradigm, hermeneutical approach along with narrative approach.

The data collection was carried out using PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar databases. Research papers were identified according to search terms "uncertainty", "mental health", "health", "refugee", "anxiety", "depression", "war", "future", "Eastern philosophy", "mindfulness".

REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

Russia launched a large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. As of June 23, 2022, 6 275 000 people were estimated to be internally displaced in Ukraine [16] and over 8 400 000 refugees headed toward other countries as of June 28, 2022. Most of them fled to Poland. There are over 3 000 000 returnees as of June 28, 2022 [17]. The overwhelming majority of Ukrainians escaped the war by going abroad for a short period of time and expecting to return home soon. The welcome given to Ukrainians was unprecedented: under the EU's Temporary Protection Directive, they have been given the right to work and access to health care, education, housing, and other services for up to three years [18]. Being anxious and distressed, experiencing severe trauma, loss, survivor's guilt [19 – 24], Ukrainian refugees (mainly women and children) left their family members and daily life behind without a clear plan for the future. The military aggression of Russia, which has covered the entire territory of Ukraine, has made many Ukrainian refugees think about their future in the places of their temporary residence.

The habitual discourse of life regulated by the type of rationality that dominated in a given socio-cultural tradition has been replaced by a narrative of chaos. Caught up in the tornado of life, Ukrainian refugees have been involved in the ongoing struggle for the future without any clear resolution. Like the COVID-19 pandemic [25], the war has revealed that the changes are the only constant in life. In this type of narrative, there is room for a huge amount of uncertainty that drain individuals emotionally and trap into the endless worst-case scenarios of the future. Uncertainty is something that is difficult to tolerate. Human beings "seek to understand, predict and control – it helps us learn and it keeps us safe. Uncertainty can feel dangerous because we cannot predict with complete confidence what will happen" [26]. It often results in a deepening of anxiety and depression [27 - 29] already strongly expressed as the consequences of the war.

In this paper, we want to consider three narrative interviews with the Ukrainian refuges in Poland through the lens of their plans for the future. In two cases, there is no long-term planning for the future, no clear vision and perspective. The planning time frame is within one month. This is due both to the period of affordable residence in the provided apartments and the possibility of returning to Ukraine.

The interviewee A (a 63-year-old woman, retired) has an apartment and a cottage house in Ukraine. The cottage house is her favorite place there and she misses it. After the death of her husband, she has devoted a lot of time to this place. As far as possible, she tries to organize her life in Poland as it was in Ukraine.

"I love the craft of hand embroidery and have often practiced it at home. I ordered embroidery samples here. I am going to embroider in the pavilion. Usually, I do it in winter. And now I am going to do it in summer"

At the same time, she emphasizes that life has dramatically changed and everything has become upside down.

"My life has changed 180 degrees. I try not to think about the cottage. Now I have to think about my life here"

The desire for the usual order of things and rational planning is in conflict with the uncertainty of constantly changing living conditions of the refugees. The interviewee A does not plan her future, because she needs to leave the apartment within a month, and this frightens her.

"I did not want to flee from Ukraine. But I thought that my granddaughter Sasha should not face with the atrocities of this war, sounds of sirens, and bomb explosions. Thus, I came here. I want at home. But where to take Sasha? What if they start bombing again? I do not want Sasha to suffer. I would like to stay here. But where to live? I cannot afford to rent an apartment"

As far as housing constitutes a core determinant of health and well-being [30], the long-term deprivation of the fundamental human right to adequate housing or insecurity about being able to afford housing (referred to as housing affordability stress) contributes to reductions in physical and mental health [31; 32]. Baker et al. stress that "both prolonged and intermittent exposure to HAS negatively impact mental health, irrespective of baseline mental health" [31].

Economic security has a direct correlation to health, both physical and mental. An interviewee's pension, as well as her temporary earnings, do not make it possible to rent an apartment on her own and pay utility bills.

"I looked for apartments for rent on OLX. But my income is half as much as the price".

Despite the unprecedently warm welcome, the right to work and access to medical care provided by Poland, she has been caught in an uncertainty trap. However, she tries to rearrange her life according to her new environment and retains control over the situation.

For the interviewee B (a 49-year-old woman, university professor), the situation is somewhat different. She is deeply traumatized by the war that has affected her both mentally and physically.

"I cannot say what is wrong with me. I am just falling apart. I cannot walk. There are stairs in the house where we stay. I could not get up and down. I visited doctors but they could not help me"

She worries that she will have to return to the war zone. Her biggest concern is security, both physical and economic, which are in conflict with each other. In order to meet the need for physical security, she has to stay in Poland where she and her family members feel safe.

"I do not want to hear the sounds of the alarm sirens. I do not want to live in the basement and wait for a bomb every minute. My mother is sick and needs medical care. It is good here. We are safe here"

On the other hand, she is frustrated as she waits for an order from her university that she must return to Ukraine and conduct offline classes.

"I cannot stay here for a long time. I am not retired yet. I have to work"

The interviewee B is trapped between her need to stay in a safe place and the necessity to return home where it is not safe and secure. She does not have future plans and goals. Her future is not an open road full of the different options. She perceives her future as something imposed from above and out of her control.

"I will go back to Ukraine if they say"

This is a rather risky state of affairs, in which "the individual experiences feelings of threat, uncertainty, and loss of control. The associated risk is twofold: first, there is the risk of surprising outcomes (e.g., physical injury, loss of social position, financial loss, separation from life partner, etc.). Secondly, there is a risk that the lack of control associated with "toxic stress" and allostatic overload might progress to disease" [33]. Toxic stress is associated with high risk for physical and mental morbidity and mortality [34].

The interviewee C (a 61-year-old woman, semi-retired) solved the problem of uncertainty about the future in her own way. She escaped the war in Ukraine twice. In 2014, she fled her home in Donetsk region with her son, and this experience was tough. She had gone through denial, anger, bargaining, depression and eventually accepted the situation. In 2022, she fled Kyiv where she rented an apartment and had a job. She repeatedly stressed that the second escape was not anything out of the ordinary, as she resigned herself to the situation of uncertainty living in a rented apartment in Kyiv and owning two apartments in Donetsk region.

"I see that it is very difficult for people to accept the very fact of their sudden escape from Ukraine, where we were caught up in the chaos of the war. Here in Poland, I heard a young woman talking to someone on the phone. She complained that she could not sleep and that she had to go to a doctor for sleeping pills and antidepressants. I already went through this state in 2014. Nowadays, I am more resilient and understand that it is a part of my own experience"

Unlike the two previous interviewees, the interviewee C has a rather clear idea of what she will be doing in the near future.

"I am going to stay here if it is dangerous to return. But if my son asks me to come back and help with my granddaughter, I am ready to go".

The traumatic experience made the interviewee C reconsider her values and life philosophy.

"I owned two apartments left behind, as well as a lot of things that I loved and collected. But I realized that we did not own anything in this life. We can dream, and make plans, and have nice things, but we should not be attached to it. Everything may collapse in a moment"

She expresses the thoughts that resemble the core ideas of the Eastern philosophy. Tough lessons learned from the war help her to control the situation now, consider different plans or intentions she has for the future. Despite the conditions in which she has to live today, she has managed to deepen her vision of the future by changing her attitude to the situation, accepting it, and rethinking her life philosophy. Within the frame of causal layered analysis [35], it is a deep change on the layer of the myth/metaphor that offers "a way of making sense of and coming to terms with the future" [36, p. 60]. Her "ownership myth" was replaced by "the detachment myth" that allowed her to navigate more easily in a chaos narrative, to become, in Nassim Taleb's definition, antifragile [37], that is, facing the chaos of life, remain unharmed and evolve as a human being.

The future is always uncertain. The war exacerbates the uncertainty that can lead to dire consequences for mental and physical health [29]. The unknown is quite often worse in our

imagination. Since the ancient times, the humanity has been facing with uncertainty. Ancient people mastered the world by splitting it into two parts – known, predictable world (Cosmos) and hostile, unknown world (Chaos). This binary opposition is the initial division of the world. Components of this opposition confront each other and are not equal in value. Most of us cling to the known world and are scared of "something in the darkness", unknown and, thus, unpredictable. Experiencing this ontological dissonance, individuals desperately try to struggle with uncertainty. Being unable to cope with the unknown, many of them feel ill, depressed, ineffective, worthless, frozen [38]. However, there are some who perceive the ocean of uncertainty as a launching pad for the better future and think about their future in a broader perspective.

One of the ways to cope with uncertainty and constant changes is to learn some important lessons from the Eastern philosophy. As John Searle stressed, "philosophy is easily the most important subject, because all the other subjects make sense only in relations to their philosophical implications" [39]. In fact, people create their own reality. And philosophy largely determines this reality. Therefore, it is philosophy that must come to the fore today to help humans in resolving their problems.

The Western world still rely on rational strategies that can fail in the face of uncertainty and constant changes. Changes and uncertainty are considered as "something bad and people are encouraged to catch the constant parts out of changing lives" [40, p. 99]. However, the postmodernist thinkers have made their own adjustments to the interpretation of the world, have urged to abandon dogmatism, monologic perception and explanation based on binary oppositions. Contemporary theories "consider change and uncertainty as something good and people are encouraged to embrace the inconstant nature of lives. They advocate a life of opening up to multiply possibilities" [40, p. 99]. Postmodernists believe that people can intuitively perceive reality as Wholeness. Trying to reconcile continuity of being with discreteness of consciousness, they appeal to Eastern mystical teachings.

Unlike the Western worldview that inclines to describe and explain the world through the lens of consistency, stability, coherence, and resolution, the Eastern mind embraces uncertainty and acknowledges its beauty. The essence of the Eastern worldview is the awareness of unity and coherence of all things and phenomena: The Oneness, the True Unity reveals itself in everything. All things are different manifestations of the same unconditional reality [41]. The oldest Chinese classic text "I Ching" [42] argues that changes form the universal way of existence. In Taoist tradition, the concept of Yin and Yang, which is often misinterpreted as a symbol of duality, expresses the idea that all apparent opposites are complementary parts of the One Whole. The transformation of nonbeing into being and being into nonbeing is a cyclical process. There is neither "before" nor "after", neither "progress" nor "regress", but just "unfoldment" and "return". Wu Chi unfolds in Tai Chi, Tai Chi – in Bagua, Bagua – in 64 cosmic situations, and then everything returns to Wu Chi. It lasts forever [43, p. 4]. Chinese philosophers understood the universe as a continuous process of interaction of complementary forces. And interaction of these forces is the source of changes.

Discussing the Eastern philosophy, an American psychiatrist Marlynn Wei emphasizes that "change, uncertainty, and contradiction are ever-present and ever-constant. You can let go of the idea of linear progress and full resolution, and by doing so, you build resilience" [44]. The key to deal with uncertainty within the Eastern tradition is to be conscious, to be focused on the present moment, "here and now". This can be achieved as a result of mindfulness – a certain mental state and therapeutic technique. The practice of mindfulness is most systematically conceptualized in Buddhist tradition. Our conscious attention is focused on the present moment and perceives the world without any judgement [45]. This practice is aimed at cultivating attentiveness to the inner and outer worlds. Zindel Segal and Mark Williams combined cognitive behavioral therapy with mindfulness-based stress reduction program elaborated by Jon Kabat-Zinn that led to the development of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy [46].

Mindfulness practice is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, vitality, adequate self-esteem, empathy, autonomy, competence, optimism, and pleasant emotions [47 – 51]. Studies have also shown significant negative correlations between mindfulness and depression, neuroticism, dissociation, cognitive reactivity, difficulties in emotion regulation, alexithymia, general psychological symptoms [52].

The practice of mindfulness makes it possible to face our fears and assess what is within our control and what is not. It purifies anxious mind and makes it more flexible. It helps to overcome automaticity of thinking, eradicate existing patterns of behavior, and develop human abilities and talents. Mindfulness meditation is used as a method of personal growth so that an individual can develop a more positive attitude towards life in general [53]. "Through our own resilience and awareness, we can discover the power, and sometimes even beauty, of uncertainty" [44].

CONCLUSIONS

Bearing a set of negative beliefs about uncertainty and reacting negatively to uncertain and unpredictable situations, individuals fall into a vicious cycle of uncertainty fueled by their fear of uncertainty. Uncertainty takes us to the future that seems threatening or returns us to the world of primordial chaos. In both cases, we are not in the present moment, "here and now". As far as we have no control over the past and future, we feel helpless and experience fear, anxiety, depression. Returning to the present gives us back control over the situation. By expanding the range of possible visions of the future, we stop focusing on the worst-case scenario. By accepting the situation and realizing what is subject to our control and what is not, we learn to comfort uncertainty by elaborating possible futures taking into account both our desires and the current situation. Our thoughts and actions today determine

our tomorrow. We cannot overcome uncertainty since it is ontologically predetermined. But we can manage our responses to uncertainty turning to the Eastern philosophy thereby maintaining our mental and physical health and *expanding the functional field of human capabilities to achieve freedom and self-realization [54].*

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